DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 229 300 SO 014 627

AUTHOR	Brown, Jeffrey L.
TITLE	Coalition Building: Drawing Universal Truths from Biased History.
INSTITUTION	Global Learning, Inc., Montclair, NJ.
PUB DATE	20 May 82
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the National Conference on Professional Priorities: Shaping the Future of Global Education (Easton, MD, May 20, 1982). Marginally legible because of small print.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Consortia; Cooperative Planning; *Cooperative Programs; *Educational Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Aid; Global Approach; Institutional Cooperation; State Departments of Education; *State Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Coalitions; New Jersey

ABSTRACT

Educators in New Jersey who had joined forces as the New Jersey Consortium for Global Education in order to submit a joint Title-IV C global education proposal with the New Jersey Department of Education experienced two major conflicts when their project was funded. The first conflict involved a difference of perception on the nature and role of the Consortium in the project: Would the Consortium serve in an advisory or in a policy making way? After a great deal of time and energy spent in many meetings, the final resolution involved the Department of Education's withdrawal as the fiscal agent and ultimately from the project itself. The second major conflict, as of yet unsolved, involved expectations of how the Consortium might best evolve beyond the life of the funded project. Lessons learned from the coalition building experience include the following: (1) coalition landscape is a minefield; (2) have fun--all work and no play makes for a dull, small coalition; (3) polish your interpersonal skills; and (4) use the complementary strengths of the various organizations in the consortium. (RM)

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COALITION BUILDING: DRAWING UNIVERSAL TRUTHS FROM BIASED HISTORY

A paper prepared for The National Conference on Professional Priorities: Shaping the Future of Global Education

The Tidewater Inn
Easton, Maryland

May 20, 1982

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After eight years of work in New Jersey to promote global education in elementary and secondary schools - from one-day conferences to two-week summer institutes, from presentations at community meetings to superintendents' roundtables, from after school in-service programs to a Title IV-C global education in-service/curriculum development project - Global Learning saw a unique opportunity to form a statewide coalition to promote global education in the 1981 request for proposals for the US Department of Education's International Understanding Program.

We were pleased that the NJ Department of Education was willing to join with us in an application to this Program under the newly raised aegis of the New Jersey Consortium for Global Education as were several educational associations, one two-year college and 17 local school districts (LEAs) despite the difficult proposal deadline of July 20th. Basically, the Department of Education and Global Learning recruited the other nine original Consortium members from among the organizations and persons with whom we had each worked in the past. We were even more pleased to get funded as of November 15th!

Our overall goal in this project involves legitimizing global education as an important priority, worthy of attention, time and local funding among the several layers of our decentralized educational system. Our expectation and hope are that educational decisions makers, whether on local school

boards or association planning committees, in state agencies or in local schools, will agree that global education's time has come, partly as a result of repeated exposure to global education events in terms of leadership seminars, summer institutes, their own professional meetings and publications. Hence, in spite of the very real budgetary constraints being encountered everywhere, a global woof will be woven into the warp of the existing elementary, secondary, Community College and teacher preparation curricula.

For the purposes of this panel, it seems that the most useful experience our coalition has had involves the major conflict that took us most of four months to identify and ultimately to resolve. I would like to describe this conflict in rather general terms and then share a number of generalizations that come primarily, but not exclusively, from this experience.

Our original Consortium was set up with the State Department of Education's serving as fiscal agent and with Global Learning as the program agent. Our responsibility entails conducting 14 leadership seminars for a broad spectrum of educational organizations and associations, 4 summer institutes for teams of teachers and administrators from 35 participating LEAs, and writing up the results in a Process and Resource Manual.

A radical difference of perception on the nature and role of the Consortium emerged right from the earliest efforts to set up the arrangements through which to administer the grant. On one hand, the NJ Department of Education reacted to notification of the grant as they usually do to all grants to the

Department, viz., to assume the primary responsibility for both the grant's fiscal administration and program implementation. The usual procedures involve State regulations regarding the need to put certain budget items out for open bid, or to seek a waiver of bid due to special circumstances, which could take up to six months to process. The Department thought they had found an appropriate mechanism through which to satisfy their legal requirements, and then began to bring Global Learning, the Program Agent for the Consortium, into the process. In effect, the Department viewed the grant as having been made to the Department, with the Consortium perceived as a sub-division and subordinate of the Department and with Global Learning's serving as a sub-contractor to the Department.

Our view at Global Learning diverged 180 degrees from the Department's. We knew that the Consortium's Steering Committee was designated in the proposal as the policy making body for this grant. This designation represented an approach opposite that of past global education efforts in New Jersey in which organizations performed little more than rubber stamp functions as Advisory Councils. Several smaller issues emerged before it became clear that the major issue underlying all others involved the very nature of the Consortium itself, viz., whether or not it would serve in an advisory or in a policy making way.

It took a great deal of time, energy and meetings to clarify the actual nature of this conflict. The final resolution involved the Department of Education's withdrawal as the fiscal agent - and then from the project itself - and the designation

of an LEA as the new fiscal agent. Two major groups are sitting on the fence at this writing to see how things develop, but we believe that they will continue to participate in the life of the Consortium. Four new organizations have joined the Consortium.

The final impact on the Consortium seems more positive than negative at this reading, particularly because this conflict served to bring members on board. One major reason involves the fact that this conflict accelerated the "buying in" process for member organizations. We had expected the organizations to go through this process over the course of the program year, most intensely during the course of their leadership seminar. The additional meetings, contacts and clarifications this conflict produced, however, led to a sense of ownership and responsibility among the Consortium Steering Committee members. I would not, however, recommend this method of establishing ownership as a preferable approach; it just turned out for us to be salvageable.

A second related issue with which we have been dealing involved expectations of how the Consortium might best evolve beyond the life and scope of the funded project. We in Global Learning have viewed the process as one of organic growth, beginning with working relationships on the Steering Committee, progressing through an intensive global education experience in one to three-day leadership seminars, after which participants would be expected to plan and conduct global

education activities for members of their own organizations and associations. The summer institutes for the teacher and administrator teams from LEAs would be the most intensive experience, lasting six days, and would represent the ultimate focus of the whole enterprise, namely, a global perspective infused into K-12 classrooms across the State.

The federal grant, hence, is perceived as the biggest carrot to entice the multiplicity of participants toward the global horizon. Obviously, the carrot has been seen as just the juice to prime the global perspective pump, for we always saw the need to extend the life of the Consortium beyond the limits of this funded project.

Enters the second major complication - talk of a "larger consortium." The complications compounded from such facts as our initial lack of formal by-laws and definite definitions of membership, the reluctance and inappropriateness of representatives from autonomous organizations to commit themselves and their organizations to anything more than the funded project without formal action of their boards, and varying levels of frustration that (understandably) flowed from the apparent novelty of operating within a non-hierarchical, networking organization. One or two members very much wanted a clearly-defined structure that implied definite commitments to the promotion of global education, but the problem we saw was the fact that one of the project's main objectives involved evolving that very commitment from somewhat interested, but not committed groups (with several of the groups' being major exceptions to this rule).

We are now at the following place, as I see it, having recently come out of the conflict mentioned above and just beginning to conduct the leadership seminars for ou constituencies. Our organization and structure have been defined with an emphasis on simplicity and clarity, leaving open the possibilities for evolving into the "larger consortium" - probably at or toward the completion of the funded project. We have renamed the Steering Committee our Board of Directors, which consists of one representative from each of the 17 organizations that signed the revised Statement of Assurances for the grant, plus the Project Director and the Fiscal Administrator. We operate according to Robert's Rules of Order with each organization having one vote. We have created a category called Associate Members for representatives from groups that join the Consortium but have not signed these Assurances, thereby leaving open the door for additional members. Associate Members will participate in the networking function and future developments of the Consortium and shall have a voice, but not a vote in decisions regarding this grant and project. We anticipate the establishment of a Development Committee under the Board of Directors to begin to identify additional projects and funding sources for the "larger consortium," and a by-laws committee is currently at work.

With this brief history in mind, I would like to state the remainder of this paper as a series of propositions, which might be entitled: "Coalition Lessons: Part I." I believe these propositions could be grouped into two categories: a) Stating the Obvious, and b) Insights - Maybe.

1. The coalitional landscape is a minefield. As Robert Hanvey once indicated, in creating this little system, you will encounter ramifications and unanticipated consequences. It helps to brush up on your skills in interpersonal communications and conflict resolution, and it might not be a bad idea to include some conflict resolution activities in your early meetings or group activities.

Our initial, major obstacle that must be overcome involves existing issues of turf and pecking order. You may be trying to organize people who see themselves as organizers and leaders in the field. Also, territorial questions arise between secondary teachers, two-year college, four-year college and university people. We once tried to organize a college-based group and held the meeting at a two-year college. No four-year college people attended. We did much better a second time when we held the meeting at Princeton University. To paraphrase Hanvey again, "Watch out for the hidden wiring."

I believe one of Global Learning's major assets as one of the key organizers in this effort, despite the fact that we were the only full time global education organization involved and had an obvious, but legitimate interest in the program, was the fact of our political neutrality regarding the wide range of associations and institutions. A second asset is our commitment to a facilitating style as opposed to assertive leadership.

2. Have fun. All work and no play (or all left brain and no right brain) makes for a dull, small coalition. We have tried to avoid business-only meetings. E.g., our initial meeting included

an alternative futures activity that required creative thinking and small group work, which we introduced as an example of the kinds of activities people would be doing in the leadership seminars and summer institutes. The confusing course of our conflict has led us toward tighter, more efficient styles of meetings, but I feel we must resurrect the right brain or we'll soon be experiencing the drain.

3. Once you're launched, a major subtle issue is egalitarian versus hierarchical modi operandi. Most of the people participating in the coalition are probably operating within hierarchical organizations and may have little or no experience in egalitarian settings. When the going gets tough, they're prone to try to pull rank instead of pulling together. The contradiction they run into involves the fact that a coalition of autonomous organizations is like a mini-UN of sovereign states. Decision-making and power ultimately rest, not in lines of authority, but in the consent of the co-operating.

4. Don't be afraid of conflict and controversy on issues of principle. Successful processing of conflict can gain the coalition and the organizers respect and confidence. Although one representative to our Consortium did try to argue at one point that the fact of conflict in our organization reflected poorly on our intention to handle global issues and perspectives, this guilt-tripping apparently impressed no one else. Others seemed to feel if this project is worth fighting over, it must be worth something; they drew comparisons with school board meetings and the dispute in El Salvador.

5. Baggage. There's good baggage, and there's bad baggage. Regarding the former, it's obvious that a coalition's major asset involves the synergy of organizations' offering their complementary strengths. Public agencies can provide great legitimacy and access to school systems, decision makers, classroom teachers and their students. Private, non-profit organizations can often render the flexibility and quick action that a coalition may require at times.

Coalition building does require a recurring commitment toward the coalition's work and goals, sometimes this entails running up the coalition's flag for recognition instead of one's own organization or ego. At other times it means agreeing not to get into issues on which you know members disagree or are in conflict, e.g., a regulating vis á vis a regulated agency. At the same time, however, it is most important to acknowledge the variety of legitimate needs and interests that members must fulfill for their own institutional survival and well-being, e.g., fundraising, enhancing one's professional track record appropriately in the course of coalition work, etc.

6. Finally, a word concerning the "reps".... Obviously, much of the potential friction in collaborative work is greased by the interpersonal relationships that develop among the participants. However, when friction points emerge, as they probably inevitably will, it is important to listen to the political signals. Even if you have established what you consider to be a good working relationship with the other representatives, you may want to remember that they are acting not just as individuals,

but on behalf of their organizations. Thus you should not take their vote on a crucial issue for granted, but sound them out directly.

In closing, I observe that, halfway through this project, I've come up with six "coalition lessons" for this panel. Perhaps by the close of the project I'll have a full baker's dozen....